

Health care system in crisis, many at forum say

Sen. Tom Harkin calls it a sick care system and urges participants to think about preventive care.

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Almost all of the 130 people who turned out Saturday at a national forum in Des Moines said the U.S. health care system is badly in need of repair.

In an instant electronic poll taken at the Des Moines Botanical Center, 53 percent of those at the forum said the health care system is in a state of crisis, while 44 percent said it has major problems.

"We need to start from scratch. It is beyond broken," said Paula Connolly of the Access for Special Kids Family Resource Center.

Saturday's forum was one of more than 30 being held across the nation by the Citizens' Health Care Working Group, charged with listening to Americans and developing health care recommendations for President Bush and Congress.

U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin urged participants to think about preventive care such as exercise; menus showing the amount of fat, cholesterol and sodium in foods; tax credits for businesses with wellness programs; and fresh fruits and vegetables in schools.

"We don't have a health care system in America," Harkin said. "We have a sick care system. If you get sick, you get care, one way or the other. But there are precious few incentives out there to keep you well, to keep you healthy, to keep you out of the hospital in the first place."

Earlier in the week, Massachusetts lawmakers approved legislation that would require all residents to purchase health insurance by July 2007 and would provide assistance to those unable to afford it on their own.

Twenty-nine percent of those attending Iowa's forum said they believed universal health care is a priority, while an additional 26 percent said access to health care is a basic right. The survey of forum participants is not a measure of public opinion.

"I think we all have a right," said John "Hai" Knapp of Lincoln, Neb., a musician who has written a song about the health care crisis. He brought signs on cardboard boxes Saturday calling for making health care affordable for all Americans.

Ibrahim Cisse, a medical doctor from Mali, Africa, who is a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa, said the status of Americans' health care system caught him off guard.

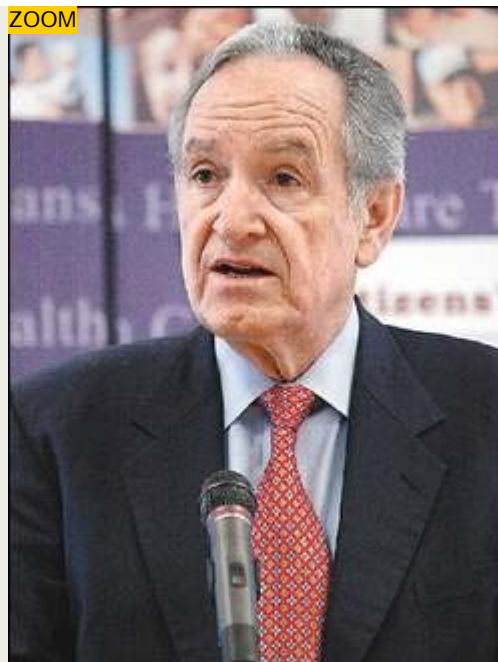
"I'm kind of surprised that they have this kind of health insurance problems," he said. "That's a big surprise for me. I thought that they are able to cover any American."

Shirley Taylor, 67, a Des Moines secretary, said she has health care coverage now because she is still employed.

"But when I retire, then it will be a major issue to have something that supplements what's available through the government," she said. "Something that benefits all levels of income people, whether it be younger people or older people or whoever."

The Citizens' Health Care Working Group will make preliminary recommendations in June and final recommendations in September.

Deborah Stehr, 45, of Lake View is one of 15 members of the group. She's a full-time caregiver for her adult son Jonathan, who has cerebral palsy.
test



KEVIN SANDERS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Take steps: Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Ia., told participants at a Des Moines forum that there aren't enough incentives to keep healthy. He suggested exercise, proper diet and wellness programs.

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